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Belenko, Viktor
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INTELLIGENCE

Bonanza or Bust?

When a Russian pilot flew a MiG-25 to northern Japan last month and asked for political asylum in the U.S., CIA Director George Bush hailed the defection as an "intelligence bonanza." According to euphoric Pentagon spokesmen, an examination of the plane and interrogation of the pilot would yield vital secrets about Soviet air-weapons technology. But U.S. experts who were dispatched to Japan for a three-week study of the aircraft have come to a different and surprising conclusion: the much-touted superplane brought to the West by Soviet Air Force 1st Lieut. Viktor Belenko is, in many respects, a clinker.

Country Tinker. The plane turned out to be a crude, early version of the Foxbat, which the Russians designed 15 years ago to bring down the supersonic B-70, a U.S. bomber that never became operational. Belenko's MiG was equipped with obsolescent electronic targeting and radar systems. Its maximum range of 1,200 miles was short compared with the American F-4 Phantom fighter's 2,100 miles. Belenko's plane was also vastly inferior to the reconnaissance version of the Foxbat, which the U.S. has tracked over much longer ranges in the Middle East. Perhaps the most striking anomaly on Belenko's aircraft was the patches clumsily riveted to the plane's surface. Said one bemused U.S. aerodynamics expert: "Those repairs looked like a country tinker had gone to work patching up a pot."

Though beat-up and even rusty in spots, Belenko's plane nonetheless had two immensely powerful Tumansky engines that are as advanced as anything made by General Electric or Rolls-Royce. U.S. experts were impressed by the engines' lubrication system and by the Soviets' highly sophisticated forging techniques. But one crucial element of the MiG-25 was missing: the four air-to-

air missiles the plane ordinarily carries. Probably to increase his speed, the Soviet pilot had flown his plane to the West while on a training flight without the heavy weapons that experts need to calculate the Foxbat's true military capability. Belenko himself was of less help than intelligence had hoped. Although he was apparently cooperating with his U.S. interrogators in a "safe house" near Washington, it seemed unlikely that he knew anything more than the mechanics of his plane.

Clearly, the bonanza had turned into something of a bust for the Pentagon. The once legendary MiG-25 no longer provided so strong an argument for obtaining more appropriations for the U.S. fighter fleet. Michigan Democrat Robert Carr, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, declared that "as a demonstration of technology [the MiG-25] calls into serious question the Pentagon claims of mushrooming Soviet military gains."

Angry Soviets. Some Washington analysts were even speculating that Belenko and his rough-and-ready flying machine might have been a deliberate Russian plant, designed to show that the U.S. Air Force has been overresponding to an imagined Soviet threat in weaponry. Others speculated that the Russians wanted the Japanese to let U.S. experts examine their plane. According to this scenario, such anti-Soviet action provided Moscow with an excuse to postpone indefinitely an agreement with Tokyo over the four strategic Kurile Islands, which were seized by the Russians in 1945. "It's far out, but that's how the Soviets think," said one senior State Department official last week.

Apparently unperturbed, the Japanese prepared last week to return the Foxbat to the Russians. The angry Soviets will send a freighter to take delivery of their aircraft at the port of Hitachi. The Japanese coolly demanded that the Russians compensate them for facilities damaged when Belenko overran the runway on Hokkaido and for the expense of dismantling, crating and transporting the plane from Hyakuri airbase, 90 miles north of Tokyo, to Hitachi.